FAMILY DISSENSIONS IN THE SELECT PLAYS OF HENRIK IBSEN AND MAHESH DATTANI

A SYNOPSIS

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A society can never exist without having institutions of kinship like marriage and family. Both from normative as well as structural point of view, family becomes the central foci of all societies irrespective of their socio-economic and political development. Leela Dube provides an adequate explanation of family and says, "Normatively, family refers to rules and regulations regarding hierarchy, avoidance, and inheritance of property. Structurally, nature and type of family can be explained as collectivism and groupings in terms of interconnections and interdependence of the family members."[1]

Family is considered as a vital institution and a foremost primary group because it is the sheet-anchor of the parental authority on the one hand, and a protector and defender of individual member's right to property on the other hand. A close relationship can be seen between family unit and marriage where, marriages are celebrated as the crucial events in a family's life cycle. They are almost certain to have consequences on the family's harmony, reputation, prosperity, integrity and, ultimately, its very survival.

It is observed that in recent times, many transformations have been taken place in the institution of family. Many changes are taking place in various aspects of people's personal and social lives. At the wider level, they are manifested through personal attributes, such as, individualism and independence. At other levels, economic, cultural, occupational, educational, and gender-based factors interface with individuals as members of the family.

The family modes and rituals vary from one marriage to the other because of cultural differences between them. Residence, size of income, class level, amount of education, and ethnic affiliation and the nucleus structure of families are obviously the important influencing

[1] Dube, Leela. *Sociology of Kinship* (Bombay: Popular Prakashan, 1974) 152.

factors. Once married, all couples encounter distresses of different types in their familial relationships which are partly imposed on them by the society. Among these are the conflicts which arise between them because they chafe under the obligations of matrimony and find marriage irksome to their free spirit. In traditional society, men become wage- earners, women become home makers, and much of their division of labour is already culturally determined for them. Although this standardization of marriage roles is necessary for societal survival, in the modern times it, clashes with the opposite tendency towards greater freedom and variety in personal behaviour.

It is impossible to determine whether it is men or women who suffer more in the family, because obviously, this depends somewhat upon the specific persons involved and the character of their domestic life. In all likelihood, however, men's traditional roles have changed less than women's and in this respect, at least, may cause less inner strife within them.

Undoubtedly, many people have suffered pique by the steady elevation of women to near equality with the men in the society, but this has commonly occurred by the granting of rights to women without taking away those already possessed by men, and presumably this development has enhanced the companionability of the sexes which is so much wanted now. On the other hand, women also find that some required roles unfairly laid out for them, have often only a remote relation to the improvements in status which have come to them in the family or the society. At all times, they are liable to some frustration because of the greater claims of family and home to their time and energies or by the husband's slim earning power or his insecure class status. When this happens too frequently, obviously wives feel aggrieved and pinioned in their marriages or their families. Conflicting situations at this stage are quite natural since basic human nature does not approve of such conditions.

These conflicts in women's role in the family arise from still larger contradictions which exist in the status of women in the society. The society cherishes for them an ideal of a womanly woman, full of feminine charm and kindness, gracious and tolerant, and a loving adjunct to her husband's more robust intelligence.

There can be some other reasons for the conflict between the family members such as the intensity, complexity and the duration of relationships. A betrayal of a relationship, such as an extramarital affair, bias towards one member against another or child sexual abuse, can produce hate as intense as the love that existed prior to the betrayal. Besides these, in the modern times conflicts are created because of the generation gap as well as communication gap are also common.

Thus it cannot be denied that a person's emotions, motivations, conflicts as well as achievements are chiefly played out within the ambit of the family. This factor is the main reason why the intricate web of family conflicts and contradictions forms the recurrent theme in literature. It has been appropriately said that the starting point of many of the greatest plays in history is the family.

The crests and troughs through which members of families belonging to different social classes pass through, have been very graphically portrayed in many of the Indian as well as Western plays. Two prominent dramatists who have repeatedly taken the family unit as the locale of their plays are Norwegian writer, Henrik Ibsen and Indian English dramatist, Mahesh Dattani. Human relationships and family saga have indeed been at the core of Ibsen's and Dattani's representations. They do not use the stage as a pulpit to deliver moral lessons bur

through their characters and their story have raised certain issues that are contaminating the healthy issues of the families.

Henrik Ibsen is considered as the Father of Modern Drama. He has been called a pioneer in the theatre of Modern realism because his Problem plays attacks heavily on the contemporary social maladies. There is the dramatization of the plight of the individual within a restrictive society in Ibsen's plays. John Northam, a critic, opines:

> For Ibsen, that other power, which is beyond the control of individual will and aspiration, is society. Not society merely in its institutions or its official representatives but in the embracing form of that vast and intricate web of relationships and reciprocal influences into which, inescapably, we enter by the mere fact of being born—environment, parentage, social class, upbringing, education, marriage, range and type of acquaintanceship and so on.[2]

Henrik Johan Ibsen was born on 20 March, 1828 in the town of Skien on the southeast coast of Norway. Ibsen's father, Knud Ibsen, at the time of Henrik's birth was a prosperous merchant and occupied a mansion called the Stockman House in Skien. At the age of fifteen, having attended the local school, Henrik announced that he wished to become a professional artist. His father who had sunk from being a prominent figure in his town to poverty and seclusion after the loss of his wealth, refused to consider the idea. Henrik was sent to a small coastal town as someone's apprentice where he spent six years in wretched seclusion. This ruthlessness of destiny which separated him from his family, left him frustrated and unhappy.

[2] Northam, John. *Ibsen: A Critical Study* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1937) 222- 223.

This is the main reason that Ibsen takes the family unit as the locale of his plays and presents the human dilemmas and personal conflict among the family members.

In Ibsen's play *A Doll's House* (1879), there is the projection of a very terrible picture of the sacrificial role played by women in the society. Through the character Nora, Ibsen has presented the case of married women who lead doll-like existence under the suppression of a dominant husband. Nora's husband Torvald issues decrees in the house and cannot accept the idea that his wife (or any other woman) has helped to save his life. When Nora realizes that in the return of her love and sacrifices, she has received only insult and blame, she discovers that she is treated by her husband not as a person but rather as a beautiful possession, nothing more than a toy. It becomes clear to her that her duty to herself is just as sacred as her duties to her husband and children. Moreover, she thinks she had been a doll in her father's house as well. She feels that both her father and her husband cared more about themselves rather than her happiness. In the end, Nora exits her doll's house with a door slam which symbolizes her act of bold self assertion.

By showing the intricate husband-wife relationship, Ibsen suggests that marriage becomes a mockery if equal rights are not given to the partner. He reveals to the readers the sad outcome of the subordination of a married woman by the control of her husband.

In *The Wild Duck* (1884), Ibsen concentrates on the politics within the family life, showing how easily a fragile link of family relationships in the Ekdal home is shattered by the clumsy intervention of a neurotic outsider, Gregers Werle. As a result of the tensions created by Greger's interference in the familial life of Hjalmar and Gina Ekdal, Hedving, their adolesant daughter, is driven to commit suicide in a gesture of sacrifice that could have been well avoided.

In this play, Ibsen's main interest is to show how the emotional violence can destroy the well settled family life of a person. Therefore, such a situation should be avoided. Through this play Ibsen seems to be also highlighting the importance of a marriage without the taint of any deceit. He also stresses on the need of having such relationships where evasion of responsibility does not take place and everybody shares an effectual existence.

Ibsen's *The Lady from the Sea* (1888) is a play in which the picture of Dr. Wangel's family is reflected. This is a play infused with the symbolism of the sea. The sea's changing state is reflected in the shifting moods of Ellida Wangel. Ellida is caught in a sickening marriage with a country doctor Wangel. The relationship between the husband and the wife is not a healthy one. He has two daughters (Boletta and Hilde) by his previous wife, and he and Ellida had a son who died as a baby. This puts big strains on the marriage. Ellida's longing for freedom and emotional fulfillment is symbolized in the play in the figure of a mysterious seaman to whom she was once betrothed. He appears, as if summoned out of the depths of her consciousness, to reclaim his bride.

Ellida feels that by marrying Wangel, she has lost her essential freedom as a human being. She feels that he has bought her in marriage and she has let herself be tainted in the process. The play closes on a note of reconciliation, but the happiness is tinged with more than a hint of sadness. Ellida has freely chosen the path of duty, but in doing so, she denies the validity of her longing for a more expansive romantic freedom.

Yet another play by Ibsen, *Hedda Gabler* (1890), projects the frustration and despair engendered in an alienated individual by a conventionalized family, rather society at large. Hedda Gabler, a deceased General's daughter, marries George Tesman, an average man, and

foresees a life of middle class tedium ahead when they return from their honeymoon and fail to afford a desirable house for themselves. Her frustration grows day by day and the situation becomes worse when a former flame, Eilert Lovborg, arrives to rival her husband for an academic post. When Hedda finds the manuscript of Lovborg's research work, she destroys it. Various threats confront Hedda, the threat of social declassement if her husband fails to obtain the professorial appointment promised to him; an emotional threat from her past in the shape of Eilert Lovborg, a man she once loved and the threat of sexual blackmail from Judge Brack. Later, when Hedda feels that her crime may be discovered and her romantic ideals are also shattered, there seems only one way out of the net—and she commits suicide.

Thus it would not be wrong to conclude that Ibsen's plays reveal various dimensions of the existence of an individual in the society in general and the family in particular. The various levels of dissensions within the family unit have been articulated with force, clarity as well as moral gravity in all his plays.

Mahesh Dattani is one of the most important playwrights who have helped in changing the face of the contemporary Indian theatre. He became the first Indian playwright writing in English to receive the prestigious Sahitya Akademi Award since its inception in 1955, for his play *Final Solutions.* As an active theatre practioner his aim is not at changing the society but present to us the grey realities of the urban families, the conflicts and dilemmas they face everyday, contemporary social issues like gender discrimination, sexuality and communalism.

Mahesh Dattani was born on 7 August, 1958 in Banglore where his parents had moved from Gujarat. He wrote his first full length play in 1986 and since 1995, he has been working full time in theatre. He has to his credit about ten plays and four screen plays. Besides being a

director and playwright, he is also an actor, producer and the founder of a theatre group called *Playpen*. According to R. N. Rai, "He (Mahesh Dattani) has the unique capacity to read the rumblings of contemporary urban Indian society and smell the perennial clash between tradition and modernity."[3]

In his first play *Where There's a Will (1988),* Dattani has chronicled the follies and prejudices of the Indian society as reflected within the microcosm of the family unit, the most tangible and dynamic reality in middle class Indian lives. In this play, the intricate relationship of father and son, mother and children, and husband and wife is shown in a comic mode in the family of Hasmukh, a self-made millionaire who intends to control every member of the family according to his own choice. One can see the arguments and counter-arguments between him, his wife and son in his house, What could be the reaction of a father whose son has fallen short of his expectations, is shown vividly in Hasmukh's character. He says, "My son isn't really after my wealth. That's because he doesn't have any brains."[4] On the other hand, Ajit, his son, has his own grievance against the father. However, it is not only the father-son relationship which was under the strain, the husband-wife relationship was also under pressure. This is a play where traditional family values clash with unexpected twists in the tale that completely subvert the existing stereotypes.

Another play where Dattani uses the family home as the setting, is his *Dance Like a Man* (1989). The home, with its tangible, physical presence, becomes crucial to the very existence of the three generations of its occupants, often dictating its own terms to their habitation. In this play also, Dattani shows intricate family relationships in which the dancing couple Ratna and

[3] Rai, R.N. *Perspectives and Challenges in Indian English Drama,* ed. Neeru Tandon (New Delhi: Atlantic Publishers & Distributors (P) Ltd., 2006) 20-21.
[4] Dattani, Mahesh. *Collected Plays: Where There's a Will* (New Delhi: Penguine Books, 2000) 456.

Jairaj learn and practice dance in their house disregarding Jairaj's father Amritlal Parekh's advice not to do so. Not only that, Ratna also encourages their daughter, Lata to continue dancing and be a good dancer. Later, Amritlal plays a trick on his son by encouraging only his daughter-in-law to dance so as to create a rift between them and discourage his son from dancing.

The misunderstanding between Ratna and Jairaj slowly deepens and she accuses her husband of destroying his own career, and family life. She goes to perform alone ignoring the husband. The result is that the dancing couple falls apart.

Mahesh Dattani's another play *Tara (1990)* looks at the battles, the victories and the defeats of an Indian family coping with the trauma of freak children and their survival, while also exposing the existing patriarchal stereotypes with the narrow mindset, who have always preferred a boy child to a girl child. The play *Tara* is a sensitive and pathetic document of the apathy towards the weaker gender in a society where the influence of gender discrimination seems to swallow all other bonds of filial relationship.

This play is basically a dramatization of the misery of the life of a girl and a boy who are joined together at hip and have to be separated surgically, an operation which meant a possible death to one of them. Beneath, the crest of social criticism of female suffering in the order of patriarchy, Dattani takes into consideration the psycho-pathetic condition of other characters as well, making a fine fabric of the intricacy of pattern of relationships both inside and outside the domain of the family.

In the same way, Dattani's play *Bravely Fought the Queen (1991)* centres round an Indian joint family with intricate relationship among its members. The world of women and the

world of men clash with each other. Important characters in the play are Dolly, Lalitha, Alka, Baa, Jiten Trivedi and Nitin Trivedi. This is a play where young generation women suffer at the hands of their husbands and mother-in-law. Dattani has shown in this play the strained mother-in-law and daughter-in-law relationship as prevalent in our society. In Hindu joint families, they often suspect and accuse each other leading to reversible reactions between them. The play also deals with the case of those wives who discovers to their shock, the homosexuality of their husbands. Indirectly, they commit violence towards their wives and their wives too never love them. This kind of relationship is shown through the characters of Nitin and Alka. Dattani clearly shows how joint family is slowly breaking down in our society. This can be probably related to the fact that most men and women have become individualistic, selfish and self-centred in the contemporary society.

All the plays by Dattani which have been selected for the study, are varied in content as well as appeal but they all project characters who struggle under the weight of traditional and cultural constructions within the set- up of their families. They give an authentic glimpse of the disintegration in family- life which is typical of the Indian situation in the contemporary times.

We thus see that the plays of both Ibsen and Dattani abound in familial issues. The varying shades of complex human nature emerging under different forms of tensions have been brought out with the psychological insight as well as sensitivity by these playwrights. They seek to make their readers/audience introspective and encourage them to find out some concrete solutions for their day-to-day life problems. Their plays depict the want of harmony in the family due to forces of fate as well as rigid social and familial norms.

However, due to different socio-political milieus on the one hand as well as the huge age-gap between them, some points of divergence in the plays of these two literary stalwarts are also found. For instance, Dattani is more experimental as far as the dramatic techniques are concerned and also likes to take up more controversial social issues.

A comparative study of the plays of Ibsen and Dattani thus promises to be an interesting venture. The works of these powerful and impressive dramatists have been worked out and explored in different ways, though in isolation. To the best of my knowledge and belief, a comprehensive, critical and analytical insight has not been laid keeping in mind a comparative study of these two writers specially regarding the portrayal of family saga in their works. Therefore, the proposed study would add a new dimension and open up a new vista of research in English literature. To limit the study to a permissible length, only four plays of each of these writers have been selected for the study. The objectives of the study would be:

a) To explore and analyse the different socio- economic as well as psychological factors causing discords in the family set- up along with the factors influencing the making of the two dramatists;
b) To scrutinize the response of the two dramatists to the dissensions found in the families and evaluate them in terms of themes and characters;
c) To decipher the different aspects of family dissensions and the circumfrences of human relationships in the selected plays of the two dramatists;
d) To make an extensive comparative study of Ibsen and Dattani as dramatists with reference to their exploration and presentation of family saga in their works.

To attain these objectives, the chapter- scheme of the proposed study is as follows:

1. Chapter I – Introduction: (a) Various Dimensions of Family Dissensions.

   (b) Making of the Artists.

2. Chapter II – The Self Within the Family: *A Doll's House* and *The Wild Duck.*
3. Chapter III – Scarred Psyches: *The Lady from the Sea* and *Hedda Gabler.*
4. Chapter IV – Matrix of Gender Bias: *Dance Like a Man* and *Tara.*
5. Chapter V – Exorcizing Patriarchy: *Where There's a Will* and *Bravely Fought the Queen.*
6. Chapter VI – The Language of Family Dissensions.
7. Chapter VII – Conclusion.

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